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SUBJECT: TAJIK WOMEN IN POLITICS? AS LONG AS DINNER'S STILL ON THE TABLE...

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Tajik women active in political dialogue and the public sphere have had mixed success in establishing a meaningful discussion group or changing the profoundly discriminatory culture. In a meeting with visiting Central Asian Affairs Director Pamela Spratlen, members of the local non-governmental organization "Women Voters" debated the effectiveness of their monthly discussion clubs, noting that in some cases, they have raised awareness on important social issues, but in others, their recommendations gather dust in government ministries. Women Voters provides a good example of the lack of capacity of local non-governmental organizations in Tajikistan. Most U.S. funding is channeled through international non-governmental organizations who have been active in trying to stimulate local groups into action, but a real understanding of public activism or advocacy has yet to take hold. The group reflects the weak political party system in Tajikistan, with only three of the eight registered parties participating in the monthly roundtable. The methods of the roundtable raise questions about its credibility and sustainability as a civil society organization: the members pay the speakers an honorarium, and sometimes pay the press to report on their discussions. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) On May 8, the Director of the Office of Central Asian Affairs, Pamela Spratlen, met with the working group of a local NGO, Women Voters, to discuss the role of women in Tajik society and politics. Eight non-governmental organization and political party representatives participated: Rano Akhunova, director of Women Voters; Solekha Akhmedova, member of the People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT); Takhmina Said-zoda (PDPT); Sharofat Khusain, member of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT); Zараfo Raxmoni (IRPT); Ma'rifat Shokirova of the Committee on Women and the Family; Roziya Tabarova, director of the organization "Orzu"; and Hurinisso Gaffor-zoda, director of the organization "Oshtii milli."

13. (U) Akhunova, the director of Women Voters, opened the meeting by describing the group's purpose: to expand the role of women in Tajikistan in order to achieve a democratic state. The National Democratic Institute originally funded the group, bringing together the "larger" political parties and women's non-governmental organizations in Tajikistan for a 10-day trip to Warsaw to study the role of women in politics in Poland. [NOTE: Women Voters no longer receives NDI funding, but continues to receive resources from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and has received two Democracy Commission grants from the Embassy. NED did not coordinate its funding with the Embassy. END NOTE] The group has continued to meet, conducting monthly roundtables in order to bring "the important questions of the day" to light, such as suicide (self-immolation), women in prison, polygamy, family planning and the new presidential decree banning hijabs and mini-skirts in schools. Akhunova told the Director that the last roundtable, on the topic of traditions, was held May 3. Women Voters selected the topic based on President Rahmon's recent spate of cultural decrees, including changing his last name from the russianized "Rahmonov." Following every monthly roundtable,

Women Voters drafts a letter outlining its conclusions and recommendations to the relevant government ministry or committee which deals with that particular topic.

14. (U) Akhunova took a fatalistic approach to the recommendations that the organization produces after each roundtable, repeatedly saying that their influence ends once they pass on the document. The group has achieved some small successes. After the roundtable on women's prisons, the group heard from an Uzbek woman imprisoned in Tajikistan and successfully advocated for her transfer to Uzbekistan, where her family would be able to visit. Another particularly moving example for the women present came after the roundtable on polygamy. Women Voters had discussed the lack of legal rights for second and third wives in Tajikistan, and afterward learned of a woman, a second wife, whose child had been abducted by her husband and sold. After an involved legal battle, the organization succeeded in securing the return of the child. Akhunova used these examples to point out once again that all of the themes of their roundtables come from "real life" and that they see the work of their organization as a small step towards democracy.

15. (U) Of the eight currently active parties, only the PDPT, IRPT and the Democratic Party of Tajikistan are represented at the Women Voters roundtables. When asked why this was, Akhunova told Spratlen that at the time Women Voters was formed, only five parties existed. All five of those parties were invited to join, and at the time four did. She further defended the organization's composition by saying that two of the three parties represented in Parliament actively participate (the NDP and IRPT; the Communists are missing), and that two relatively new parties, the Agrarian and Economic Development Parties, hardly participate in political life regardless. Akhunova stressed that they continually invite women from unrepresented

DUSHANBE 00000743 002 OF 002

parties to participate, but have not yet had any takers.

16. (U) PolOff's question regarding the governmental Committee on Women and the Family and its impact was met by a few seconds of uncomfortable silence as the NGO members looked at each other and Shokirova, who works for the Committee. Shokirova defended the Committee, responding to group members' assertions that the Committee is just an arm of the government which does what it is told. Other members rushed to her side, saying that the Committee has provided grants to organizations advocating for women's rights and that more than anything else, the personality of the chairperson of the Committee determines its relative success or failure.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: Post will continue to report on non-governmental organizations' activism in the area of human rights, but notes that this particular organization - Women Voters - has yet to prove itself an effective champion of women's rights. The members of the roundtable provided some insight on the role of women in Tajik society. All of these women noted that while they are leaders in their respective parties or organizations, at the end of the day they return to a home life where traditional gender roles remain deeply ingrained. Akhunova has previously told PolOff that she would prefer not to expand the working group to include additional political parties. She has also described the financing of Women Voters. Speakers at each roundtable receive honorariums of \$50, and the bulk of their financing pays for hall rental and coffee breaks for 80-plus people. Akhunova has also admitted to paying reporters to attend the roundtables for fear that the event would not otherwise receive attention. Paying its own members to participate in an event they themselves are organizing, paying for media coverage, and consciously excluding certain parties raise grave concerns about the legitimacy of this self-described political discussion group. END COMMENT.  
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